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Theme for English H: Identity Poems in a Multicultural English Class

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Period 7 was bustling with thirty juniors, a piece of pastry in their hands, navigating the room and role-playing specific characters from stories they read in our American Literature course.

“What’d you learn this year, old sport?”

“That it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird, and you never really understand a person until you climb inside their skin and walk around in it.”

“Don’t tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody. By the way, where do the ducks go in the winter?”

“I saw Sarah Good with the Devil! Calpurnia made me sign the Devil’s book!”

My classroom was alive with students dressed in a pink suit, a red hunting cap, a bonnet, a shirt with a giant ham drawing attached, and a bright scarlet “A” pinned on. However, as I saw my diverse students step into the shoes of Gatsby and Daisy, Atticus Finch, Abigail Williams, Laura Wingfield, Holden Caulfield, and Christopher McCandless at this “dinner party,” I wondered, *do characters in the literature we study serve as role models or representations of all my students? Can my students make meaningful text-to-self connections to the stories read in class? What instructional activities can I implement to create an inclusive environment for my students of all cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds?*

The Importance of Culturally Responsive Teaching

In a traditional English classroom, students are expected to read books from

“the canon,” which typically includes works such as *The Great Gatsby*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Although traditional Western classics with their universal themes and captivating plots hold literary merit, the protagonists are homogenous for the most part, and the literature is sometimes inaccessible for students of multiracial and multicultural groups. In “The Importance of Multicultural Education,” Geneva Gay posits, “Many ethnically diverse students do not find school exciting or inviting; they often feel unwelcome, insignificant, and alienated. Too much of what is taught has no immediate value to these students. It does not reflect who they are” (5). In other words, students of diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds may feel marginalized and unrepresented by canonical texts that do “not reflect who they are” or instruction that “has no immediate value” for them.

With many school districts nationwide experiencing rapid growth in the number of students of color, culturally and linguistically diverse students, and students of low-income families, it is important that teachers address this diversity through culturally responsive practices, which include forming authentic and caring relationships with students; using curriculum that honors each student’s culture and life experience; communicating respect for each student’s intelligence; and holding consistent and high expectations for all learners (Howard 178). Ultimately, teachers

can make canonical texts more engaging to *all* students by planning culturally responsive activities that cater to a heterogeneous group, in addition to creating an inclusive space for students' diverse backgrounds, identities, and voices.

Fostering Multicultural Awareness in my English Classroom

In my English classes, I develop lessons and activities to support diversity and to create an inclusive and equitable learning community. For example, after reading Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B," my students honor their culture and life experiences and maintain authentic and caring relationships with others by writing and sharing identity poems. First, students explore how Beneatha in *A Raisin in the Sun* grapples with her cultural identity through her relationships with Joseph Asagai, who embraces his Nigerian heritage, and George Murchison, who rejects his African roots to fully assimilate into "American" society. Synthesizing Hansberry's play with Hughes' "Theme for English B," students are asked to make connections between Beneatha and the speaker of the poem's struggle with identity. For instance, in this poem, the speaker establishes his race: "So will my page be colored that I write? / Being me, it will not be white" (27–28), shows how he is different from his classmates and instructor: "the only colored student in class" (10), and comes to the realization that regardless of racial differences, they are all Americans with similar interests: "I guess being colored doesn't make me not like / the same things other folks like who are other races" (25–26).

After a discussion on multiculturalism, assimilation, and what it means to be an "American," my students are asked to reflect on their own identities, interests, experiences, and how they "stand" or "fit" in

society. Students then begin writing stanzas that emulate the structure and style of Hughes' poem and include the writer's race, age, hometown, culture, traditions, social status, as well as final insights they have about their own identities. After composing their poems, students are encouraged to share them in small groups, or if comfortable, in front of the class. After years of implementing this activity, I have noticed that students genuinely become inquisitive about learning their peers' stories, as well as more familiar with diverse cultures and empathetic of each other's experiences.

Identity Poems: Student Examples on "Theme for English B"

Hector Bali wrote,

"Miss Yon said,
Go home and write a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true.

I am seventeen, born in Hackensack, New Jersey.

I went to school there at Jackson Avenue Elementary,
then I moved to Fair Lawn in the first grade.

My parents immigrated from Pakistan to America in '92. I am a Pakistani American, and most importantly,

I am a Muslim.

At age seventeen, I have come to appreciate my Pakistani culture.

From the diverse food to the language, all of it never ceases to interest me.

I like to play video games. I like to watch shows and movies.

I like to hang out with friends and especially my huge family.

But most of all, I like to play and watch basketball.

I am a Knicks fan, and although my heart is
ripped out of my chest
Every time they blow a lead, I'm still loyal
to the team.
Even though I like all of these things that
other people like to do too,
I can't help but feel that I am
misrepresented.

Being a Muslim in America, I am, like
millions of others, misrepresented.
Misrepresented by just a small amount of
extremists that claim they are
"Muslims"—they are not.
I have been called a terrorist before, as well
as many other Muslims that I know.
This stereotype has me thinking—
How can a religion of over 1.8 billion
people
Be represented by the actions of a couple
extremist groups?
Do people really believe that this many
people could be terrorists?

This is my page for English H.”

Katherine Araya wrote,

“Ms. Yon said,
Go home and write a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you
Then, it will be true.

So I am sitting here attempting to write this
page.
I am 16, Puerto Rican, born in the Bronx.
That's where I attended a private Catholic
school.
I was raised on traditions, in an apartment
where family is everything.
The row of “piragua” stands lead to the
house
I grew up in. In a neighborhood where I
don't
stand out from my neighbors. The people
in the houses laying in their privileged beds.

in a town full of privileged people,
my family stands out. The only foreign
people
on the block sit in a house conforming to the
“norm.”
I am one of them, the one attempting to
write this page.

Right now, I am not sure who I am. Or who
I want to be for that matter.
I love to sew; I love to write; I love to be
alone; I love to read.
The reading I do on my free time influences
me,
so I guess you can say I am what I read.
I read about big city dreams, and high hopes
for the world.
So why do I stand out on my block?

Is it the loud Spanish music we play?
Is it that every party we have, 30 people
show up?
Is it my loud family? Oh, I know, it must
be my “ethnic” food.
Apparently, I will not be anything “special”
in this world.
Little do they know I have come a long way
in my education.
I've been from tutor to tutor, and struggled
my way to be
in this seat, in an Honors class.
They don't know me, and they will never
know me.
Because they are too caught up in assuming.

This is my page for English H.”

Tommy Ceno wrote,

“Miss Yon said,
Go home and write a page tonight
And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true

I wonder what it's like, to be absolutely
white.

I wouldn't know; I am sixteen, Filipino, and
New Jersey born.
I go to school at Fair Lawn High School,
where I feel I don't always fit in.
Maybe it's just because of my darker
brownish skin,
or maybe my smaller eyes,
that don't really show who I am.
I'm not as smart as you think,
nor am I addicted to Spam.

Black versus white it seems all the time,
I feel like a middle man, not fitting into
either.
But, for some reason, I always seem to try.
I love listening to Drake, Trippie Redd, and
Travis Scott.
Does that mean I finally get to fit in?
Or should I keep eating my barbecue and
rice?
Or throw my own culture in the bin?
Which side do I choose? Or do I get to
choose?
Is it a choice? Or can I cut loose?

Filipino is what I am. I'll worship Manny
Pacquiao any day.
Just like those who worship Uncle Sam,
just respect me for who I am,
and I'll do the same for you.
I can fit in anywhere and anytime
I don't have to be eating rice,
or praising a certain shrine.
Just remember that I am the same as y'all.

This is my page for English H.”

Charlie Brenner wrote,

“Miss Yon said,
Go home and write a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true.

I really wish it was that simple.
I am sixteen, white, born in Poland,

But I grew up in Queens, New York.
I've got blonde hair and blue eyes,
and I was usually one of few white kids in
any class.
The neighborhood and school were always
so mixed,
mostly Hispanics, Blacks, Asians, and fewer
Caucasians.
It was hard finding others like me.

I'm still like most kids, I like to eat and
sleep,
I like to play video games, browse the web,
listen to music, and spend time with friends.
I guess being different in one way doesn't
make me an outcast.
But I still worry, what do others think of
me?

Since I'm new here, it's still questionable.
But what I do know,
is how some of my new friends here think of
me.
Many of them grew up in Fair Lawn,
while I was raised in the city;
We grew up differently.
But in some ways we've had similar
experiences.
We could've been completely different,
or be pretty much the same.
But one thing's for certain now,
I'm not as different as I thought I was.
Instead, I can connect to others because
I've finally found others like me.

This is my page for English H.”

Dennis Garces wrote,

“The teacher said,
Write a poem that describes you.
Let it flow from your mind.
If you do, then your grade will be true.

I find it difficult to say I what think,
but here we are; I hope it passes in a blink.

I am 16, Latino, and have only lived in Fair
Lawn.
My parents are immigrants who are looked
down upon.
I fear speaking aloud and in front of a large
crowd.
I spend my lunches trying my best,
getting my work done to pass these tests.

It is difficult to locate my passions,
but I do enjoy running, jumping, and
climbing a tree.
I enjoy every genre of music as long it
resonates with me.
But people seem to expect me to like
Bachata or rap,
but my skin color doesn't say I like music
like that.
I love what I love, but that feels trite.
I always feel as though I understand so little
of life.

Being me feels more complex
than something that could be summed up, or
compared to a text.
We are all one, all sisters and brothers
but distance ourselves from one another.
We mustn't split up; we always learn from
each other.
Even though you may be older and wiser,
we are all from the same America, the great
equalizer."

Post-Reading: An Empathetic Discussion and Learning Moment

My period 7's poem presentations ended
with an impromptu fireplace burning on the
SmartBoard in the background and the buzz
of students extolling their classmates for
passionate and honest readings. The learning
environment was positive and the identity
poems served as an inclusive learning
opportunity for students to create
conversations among diverse cultures. My
students discussed their similar tastes in
music: "I listen to K-pop too; did you hear

BTS' new song?", "Cardi B or Nicki
Minaj?", "I learned the Bachata in
Dominican Republic over the summer!"
They then moved onto topics of different
foods tried: "Bibimbap is a traditional
Korean rice dish," "Horchata tastes just like
rice pudding," "I know how to cook Masala
Dosa too."

My students bonded over their mutual
love for specific foods, books, music, and
hobbies, but what resonated with me was
how open my students were in sharing their
experiences and sincere reflections on where
they "belong" in society. For instance,
Katherine shared, "The only foreign people
on the block sit in a house conforming to the
'norm'; I am one of them, the one
attempting to write this page." Tommy
questioned, "I love listening to Drake and
Travis Scott. Does that mean I finally get to
fit in? Or should I keep eating my barbecue
and rice? Or throw my own culture in the
bin?" Charlie related, "It was hard finding
others like me." Hector revealed, "Being a
Muslim in America, I am, like millions of
others, misrepresented... I have been called
a terrorist before. This stereotype has me
thinking—how can a religion of over 1.8
billion people be represented by the actions
of a couple extremist groups?" Dennis
concluded, "We are all one, all sisters and
brothers but distance ourselves from one
another. We mustn't split up; we always
learn from each other... we are all in
America, the great equalizer."

Our conversation started lightheartedly
and gradually evolved into one of substance
and trust. We talked about their insecurities,
personal experiences in which some students
were harassed for their nationality and race,
the importance of one's culture, race, and
nationality in shaping identity, as well as the
detrimental effects of stereotypes and
generalizations (even those seemingly
positive). Our important takeaway from this
reflection was knowing that all of us--

whether we are Russian, Korean, Filipino, Cuban, Polish, Indian, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Dominican, and Haitian—had similar experiences, interests, and obstacles to overcome, and that we need to continue fostering empathy and become more accepting of individual differences.

In order for students of all diverse backgrounds to feel a sense of belonging and respect in a classroom, teachers must offer instructional opportunities to raise awareness of cultural and ethnic pluralism. This poem assignment empowered student voice and made texts like *A Raisin in the Sun* and “Theme for English B” more accessible since students were able to relate to the characters after reflecting on their own identities and struggles. Instead of staying silent, writing gave students a vehicle to express their frustrations or their perceptions on how they belong or fit in society. Presenting asked for my students to become vulnerable, but also made the activity much more genuine. My inclusive classroom became an enriched multicultural learning environment in which my individual students felt recognized,

comfortable, and celebrated. Ultimately, like the speaker in Hughes’ poem reflects, “As I learn from you / I guess you learn from me” (37–38), students and teachers can learn from each other and work together to promote equitable and culturally responsive learning experiences. After all, as educators, we are responsible for becoming aware of our own biases instead of remaining “colorblind,” building our own cultural competencies, and developing new pedagogies to successfully engage our rapidly changing diverse population.

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Appendix

“Theme for English B” Poem Assignment

Just like Langston Hughes' poem “Theme for English B,” your assignment is to “go home and write a page tonight, and let that page come out of you—then, it will be true.” You are to create your own poem in free verse (the structure should look like Hughes’ poem, but lines do not have to rhyme) that emulates “Theme for English B” on the theme of identity.

Upon reading Langston Hughes’ “Theme for English B,” you have learned about the speaker’s age, race, place of birth, neighborhood, and hobbies.

First, brainstorm:

(Questions to think about to help you draft your poem)

- What point do you want to get across to your reader?
- Who are you? (literally and figuratively)
- How do you represent yourself?
- What does your town or residence look like?
- What are your hobbies? Interests?
- How do you fit in our world or society?
- What traits differentiate you from other students/ people?
- Do others misrepresent you? How so?
- How do we become more tolerant of diverse races & ethnicities, religions, class, and gender & sexual identities?

Guidelines:

- Please type out your poem (Times New Roman, size 12 font, include three body stanzas).
 - Start with “The instructor said...” like the speaker does in Hughes’ poem.
 - End with “This is my page for English Honors.”
 - Use punctuation and edit your work (spelling, capitalization, grammar).
- Your “page” should address one or more of the following thematic topics: diversity, assimilation, justice, identity, race, prejudice, assumptions, what it means to be an “American,” etc.
- Your “page” must share some sort of “truth” that you've learned about yourself and the world around you. You can choose to have a serious tone or humorous tone, but make sure there is a message for the reader.
- Your “page” should emulate the structure of “Theme for English B.”
 - Look at your notes from our discussion on how the stanzas are constructed.